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Lessons Unlearned

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"Those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it." - George Santayana

Whenever I lecture on the history of Afghanistan to groups of Army officers, I always ask for a show of hands of how many are interested in history. The response is almost always about three-quarters of the audience. Unlike most Americans, who are, by-in- large, disinterested in history, Army officers generally like history. It is a required subject at West Point, and forms a significant part of the curriculum at the Command and General Staff College and the Army War College. Groups of officers often go on "staff rides" to battlefields to study the terrain with the trained eye of a military professional. Indeed, the Army has even created a center for "lessons learned" to try to draw from experience. Unfortunately, we should call them "lessons unlearned" instead.

After six years into the war in Afghanistan I am dismayed that the Army has made no discernable effort to learn from the history of warfare in Afghanistan. We are today committing the exact same mistakes, with the exact same operational plan, as the generals of the doomed interventions of Alexander the Great, the British Empire (twice), and the Soviet Union. Sometimes the similarities are so uncanny I wonder if I'm dreaming. Is it just a kind of American bravado - a sense that we're Americans, we're different - that blinds us to the lessons of the past?

A careful study of the campaigns of the four previous western invasions of Afghanistan show that war there always has two phases: In Phase One, a modern western army brings a Revolution in Military Affairs to bear against disorganized resistance, and after a few set-piece battles in which many are killed; the enemy melts away into the hills. Alexander, the British, and the Soviets all experienced this - so did we in Operation Enduring Freedom. Then the victorious army settles down for about two years of nation building, attempting to administer and govern the country from the provincial capitals (Alexander, Elphinstone, Sokolov, Barno, etc). Then comes Phase Two, in which the people who were chased up into the hills cook up an insurgency which takes root at the district level - where they are, and the western army is not - and begin

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to build the political and military capital necessary to eventually own the ground.

Operation Enduring Freedom is, in the immortal words of Yogi Berra, "like déjà vu all over again." We are making exactly the same mistakes that all went before us made. We are attempting to administer, develop, and govern the country from the level of the provincial capitals. Twenty-one years ago, Anatoly Dobrynin described the situation in Afghanistan to the Soviet Politburo Congress of 1986 with these words:

"The whole problem lies in the fact that military results have not been followed up by political and reconstruction actions. At the center, there is authority; in the provinces, there is not. We control Kabul and the provincial centers [emphasis added], but...the government is supported by a minority of the people."

Of course we are not the Soviets. The differences between our efforts to assist, develop and protect the legitimate, elected government of Afghanistan and the Soviet imposition of communism at the point of a gun are too obvious to belabor. We are not them. But the difference in legitimacy should not blind us to the commonality of our efforts at the operational level of war. And the outcomes are becoming eerily similar as well. Consider the words of Marshall Sokolov, the Commander-in-Chief of Soviet forces in Afghanistan, reporting in Moscow on the situation on the ground in 1986:

"The military situation has recently become worse. The shelling of our garrisons and our firebases has increased. They are mainly fighting in the villages, counting on our retaliating against the population centers and villages in which they are hiding [emphasis added]. It is impossible to win such a war by military means."

Sound familiar? Today, just as the Soviets and the British and the Greeks did, we are expending the majority of our energies doing precisely what the enemy wants us to do -- chasing an endless supply of illiterate teenage boys with weapons around the countryside and killing them, so that their male relatives all want revenge. AK-47's and M-4's have replaced laminated bows and spears, but everything else is the same. The after-action reports from Herodotus to the Soviet General Staff all report the same enemy tactics. We're like that team that plays the Harlem Globetrotters, going along with their game plan, and we think it's our plan - except this is not funny - men are dying out there. ABC News reported last week that Afghanistan is now more lethal than Iraq.

So what operational lessons can we draw from history? What are the commonalities of the Greek, British (twice) and Soviet defeats at the operational level of war, and how can we get off the track of repeating them and onto the track of victory? They can be summarized in two, simple, but related main points:

One: No one ever defeated an insurgency in Afghanistan by killing insurgents. The Soviets killed a million and a half people, and lost. The November 2007 Senlis Council report shows that 54 percent of the country now has a permanent Taliban presence.¹ The current operational approach of squeezing the toothpaste from one side of the tube to the other and then leaving is not working. This is what the enemy wants us to do: chase them into villages, martyr them, cause collateral damage, and lose the village to the Taliban permanently.

Two: No one ever defeated an insurgency in Afghanistan operating from the provincial level. The enemy is at the district level. Instead of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), we need District Reconstruction Teams (DRTs). As we learned in Vietnam, we must have a permanent presence in every district. The current effort is one level too high. The troop-to-task ratio is mind-boggling: There is now roughly one PRT for every one million Pashtuns living in abject poverty. But if a DRT was located on unwanted land near every district center, with police trainers and a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) within minutes of any Taliban provocation, the local police would start to put up a fight instead of running away. (Who can blame them now? With 30 rounds of ammunition and help often three or four hours away, who wants to be a martyr for Karzai?) And by maintaining constant contact at the district level, civilian officials and specialists can work closely with local elders, getting to know and addressing local needs. It's the first rule of counterinsurgency: Own the ground.

This would not require major new forces, just faith in history -- and good Forward Air Controllers at the DRTs. Obviously, they would be a target for the Taliban, because they would be the biggest threat imaginable to their strategy: A steady, engaged presence that actually helps the people. There are approximately 340 districts in the insurgency zone in the south, depending on how you count them and whether or not some are actually official. And there are roughly 45,000 Coalition troops. That's enough for 340 one hundred-man teams, reinforced with ANA platoons and Embedded Training Teams (ETTs), with 10,000 people left over. We can try it, and maybe pull this thing out - or we can continue to do exactly what the Greeks, the British and the Soviets did, and our ghosts, too, will one day haunt the Khyber Pass.

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¹ Senlis. "Stumbling into Chaos: Afghanistan on the Brink," November 2007. *Senlis Council.net*
<http://www.senliscouncil.net/documents/Afghanistan_on_the_brink> (03 December 2007).